A Life in Macedonian Affairs – Interview with Mick Veloskey

Michael Veloskey was one of the first leaders of the Macedonian community in Australia. He has been active for over 60 years, and in that time has helped establish newspapers, churches, human rights groups and other community organizations. Now 82 years old, Mick Veloskey was interviewed by Pollitecon Publications editor, Victor Bivell.

Mick, when and where were you born and can you tell us about your parents and their life under the Ottoman Empire?

I was born in 1924 in the village Gradche, Aegean Macedonia. My father, my mother, my grandparents from both sides and the rest of the families were born under the Ottoman occupation and they were badly suppressed and when the Ottoman Empire collapsed we thought that the people would have a bit more freedom and a bit more choice for a better life but unfortunately this did not happen.

My father left for Australia when I was about a year old. My grandparents, I remember, they used to put me on the knee and they used to say to me “Sinko” in Macedonian of course, “Nikogash nema da zaboravish sho nie sne Makedontsi. Nito Grtsi, nito Bulgari, nito Serbi, nito Albantsi.” [Little son, never forget that we are Macedonians. Not Greeks, not Bulgarians, not Serbians, not Albanians.] They were the words of my grandparents from both sides.

My mother, my grandparents from both sides, could not speak a word of Greek. The only language they spoke was Macedonian, and also Turkish during the Ottoman occupation.

During my youth…I can close my eyes now and picture the village the way it was, a small river dividing the upper and the lower village, and a hill to the west which is called Sveti Ilia and a little church up the top there and also a spring which was flowing out from the mountains. The water from that spring, summer and winter, was absolutely wonderful to drink and very, very cool.

How strong was your parent’s sense of their Macedonian identity?

My father, my mother and also the other relatives, every one of them, my uncle, everyone of them, felt that they were Macedonian but nothing else. Irrespective of what was taking place in the Balkans.

Can you tell us about your childhood in the village?

My childhood in the village was a very happy one because I had a lot of relatives and also young relatives who were my age and some a bit older. We had a wonderful time. At the age of six or going towards six and a half/ seven, we were forced to go to Greek school. We were not allowed to speak anything but Greek. If you were heard speaking Macedonian by the police or Korofilatsi as they called them in Macedonian, you were taken and punished. Even at the age of seven. As I grew older and older, I felt that our people were severely suppressed. They were not allowed to speak in Macedonian, sing in Macedonian or dance. The church services which were previously in Macedonian were forbidden. They were only allowed to have the sermons in Greek, in no other language. Even if people spoke to the animals in Macedonian they were taken to court and they were fined heavily and in some cases they were even gaoled.

Things got worse and worse. My father was in Australia and we were in Macedonia. Life was beginning to get worse and worse because of the suppression that was carried out. At that particular time the prime minister of Greece was Venizelos. He put through legislation, draconian measures, which were anti-Macedonian. We thought he was bad but eventually he was replaced by Metaxas - who was a straight out fascist, he idolized Hitler, and he put through even worse legislation for the suppression of Macedonians.

How did your family make a living?

In those days, as I mentioned before, my father had come to Australia and my father used to send us some money so we were reasonably well off in comparison to the other villagers. We also had our plots of land which we could not work on but my uncles from both sides, they used to till the land and we used to get some of the products from it. So we lived reasonably well in comparison to the rest of the villagers.

Was Gradche a Macedonian village and which were the other villages nearby?

The villages nearby were Drenichevo which the Greeks changed the name to Kranohori; Chuka, they couldn't change it to anything else but to call it Chuka. Stensko*,* they couldn't name it, and they couldn't call it in Macedonian, so they changed the name from Stensko to Stena*;* and Tikveni, Tiolista*,* Papresko, Dumbeni, Kosenets, they are in the area of our village. During the Ottoman occupation our village was virtually a centre. 99.99 per cent of the people in the village were pro Macedonians and there's proof of that. During the years that went by, there were virtually no traitors in the village, so the villagers have lived a happy life.

How did the Ottomans treat your family?

Well, my grandparents and my mother and father, they said that during the Ottoman occupation they were actually better off than when Macedonia was divided into four parts. The Greek suppression was by far, by far, worse than the Ottoman suppression.

As far as you are aware was there ever a Macedonian school in the village?

As far as I am aware I believe that there was a Macedonian school in the village during the Ottoman occupation but after that this was forbidden by the Greeks.

But was it a school, or were there just teachers?

More or less teaching, yes, Macedonian teachings there.

But not a school building?

Not a school building as such. The Macedonian language was not prohibited by the Ottoman occupiers.

Was there a Macedonian church in the village?

Yes, there was a Macedonian church. As a matter of fact there were four – one main church, Sveti Naoum, was in the village, and there were about three smaller ones in the hills: Sveti Bogorodica, Sveti Ilia, and Sveti Nikola, they were the other three.

And what happened to those churches?

Unfortunately the icons were taken away by the Greeks. My father and my grandparents used to tell me that there were a lot of icons with Macedonian writing on them. I don't know exactly what happened to them, but apparently the Greeks took them away and they replaced them with icons with Greek writing.

Were there Macedonian grave sites in the village?

Yes, there were quite a number of them as a matter of fact. Not in one spot but there was about two or three spots and the scriptures on most of them were in Macedonian writing but unfortunately they were destroyed or replaced forcefully by the Greek regimes.

You said that speaking Macedonian was prohibited under the Greek rule. What was your experience?

During 1935 just before coming to Australia I spoke to my mother in Macedonian because my mother could only speak Macedonian and Turkish. A Greek policeman heard me and he reported me. What actually happened I was reported by the policeman to the teacher, and the teacher to make an example of me in front of the whole school, in front of all the pupils, said to me "You spoke that forbidden Bulgaromanski ezik" and I said "No, that's not Bulgaromanski, this is Macedonian",

“Makedonski ezik”. And in that case she said “Put your hands out” and she gave me ten strokes on each hand very very forcefully, and I couldn’t close my hands for at least two or three weeks, they were swollen from the caning. I refused to cry and that was the reason I believe why I got the ten canes in each hand instead of the normal three.

I was not the only one who was caned in the school, there were several others as well for the same reason. As you can see, there is no way that you could call this democracy or freedom and most of the people were unhappy of the situation that was taking place in the villages, not only in their village but in the villages around us as well.

Why did you leave the village?

My father was in Australia so he applied for us to come to Australia, and my mother, my sister and I came to Australia to join him. He was living in Perth.

As I said before, my father left for Australia in late 1924-25. He came to Australia to earn money so he was sending it back to the village. He came back in 1931 and with the savings from Australia he built a two-storey home which was for us and his brother, that’s my uncle. The house is still standing in the village. My father came back to Australia after a year and soon after that we came to Australia. That was in 1935 with an Italian ship which was called Asqualino. At that particular time there was a bit of a revolt in Greece between the Veninzelos group and the Metaxas group and we are caught in the cross-fire when we were at Port Piraeus, that’s not far from Athens. That was the time when I met Ilia Malko, with his family; not his father though, because his father was in Australia like my father.

Where did you live when you came to Australia and what was life like for the early Macedonian immigrants here?

We arrived in Perth and my father was living in Perth. He had a very small business and there were not many Macedonians at that particular time. Things were very tough because the depression was on and a small number of Macedonians were in a very difficult situation because unemployment was very high and money was very tight. But also there was quite a lot of racism at that particular time in Australia. Even when I went to school there was racism amongst the children and some of the teachers, unfortunately. I was very fortunate to have a teacher called Mr De Garras and also a lady teacher. I’ll never forget her. She was a tall lady, Crawford was her name, her brother was a tennis player. She had pitch black hair, blue eyes and was a wonderful person. They had a special class at the school called “Highgate Hill” mainly for new arrivals like Macedonians, Italians, Serbs, Croatians, Greeks etc.

I went to school for three years and unfortunately my father passed away. So the burden was on my shoulders to look after my mother, who could not speak English and could not get a job anywhere, and my sister who is younger than me, to go to school. Things were very very tough.

Some of us, the younger Macedonians who felt like Macedonians decided that we should form an organization or an association. We started to do that in late 1939. In Perth there were Bugaro-Makedontsi Organizatsi, Serbo-Makedontsi Organizatsi, Grko-Makedontsi Organizatsi but there was no clear Macedonian organization. So when we formed the organization we called it “Edinstvo”. “Makedonsko Edinstvo”. So the organization, the first one in Australia of true Macedonian background, was Edinstvo, Perth 1939-40. The main participants in the group were: Ilia Malko, John Pizarcoff, Naum Sharin; Vasil Boscov; Todor Petrov, who is my wife’s father; Boris Mano, Naum Mano, Lazo Mano. Kiro Angelkov came into the organization later on, Stoian Sarbinov, he used to be at Manjimup, he came into the organization later on. Naum Kalchunov, a staunch Macedonian supporter. Stoiche Stoichev, who eventually went to Melbourne. There are many others, but I cannot remember all the names, who contributed towards the Macedonian cause in Perth. The organization took root and started to organize the Macedonian community. We had several picnics and we had virtually every Macedonian at the picnics. We also organized social evenings where we had Macedonian oro [dance], or Kolo if you like, and also Australian dancing.

When and why did you become involved in Macedonian politics and community affairs?

Well, as I mentioned, right from my early childhood my parents and my grandparents from both sides said we are Macedonians and nothing else, we can’t be anything else. When we were in Perth, as I said, they had all these other organizations and we were the only ones who were not grouped together. So we believed, and we did, form the Macedonian organization in Perth, which was the first in Australia. And the main reason was to get our people together, to cement the roots; although we became Australian citizens, that we were of Macedonian descent, and we would never forget that.

Can you tell us about the first meeting in Perth for the Makedonska Edinstvo?

A group of us in 1939, most of us under the age of 20, decided to form the Macedonian organization in Perth which we called Edinstvo. Edinstvo was formed by about eight of us. Eventually we decided to call a meeting and the meeting was held at Ilia Malko’s father’s coffee shop or boarding house at 242 William Street, Perth. We decided to call the meeting there and we expected probably about 30 people to turn up. And much to our surprise and pleasure there was only standing room at the meeting. That was the beginning. The atmosphere was electric, great enthusiasm and great expectations were expected. The committee was elected, four members were selected to work on the constitution. The next committee meeting was held within a week. A mass meeting was called and the name Edinstvo was unanimously adopted. Edinstvo was inseparable with Iskra, that’s the Macedonian paper, which ignited the Macedonians to unite throughout Australia.

The slogan was Slobodna, Nezavisna**,** Ednokupna Makedonia [Free, Independent, United Macedonia]. Makedonia za Makedontsite [Macedonia for the Macedonians] as phrased by the late 19th Century British prime minister Gladstone.

What do you think Edinstvo achieved?

Edinstvo was, I would say without hesitation, cemented the spreading of Macedonian organizations throughout Australia. So in my opinion it was the beginning of a true Macedonian movement in Australia, politically and also socially.

What other organizations were there?

Well as Edinstvo progressed and we got more and more of our people to join us, and virtually I would say that 99 per cent joined us. We formed a dancing group which was in Macedonian, and also in English; we also formed a Macedonian musical group which helped a lot with the Macedonian traditions regarding songs and dances; and a soccer team. And I believe that was one of the main reasons that the organization went ahead, although there were not many Macedonians in Perth at that particular time. But we were united.

Other groups formed in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Crabbs Creek and Queanbeyan in NSW, and others

During the Second World War you served in the Australian Air Force. Tell us your experiences?

During the Second World War many of the Macedonian younger people in Perth joined the services, Ilia Malko and I were I believe the first two to join the Australian Air Force. There were others who followed and quite a number of the Macedonians were also in the Army and also some were in the Working Force. Every Macedonian contributed towards the war effort to defeat Fascism and Nazism that was spreading its wings and causing a lot of problems. Of course later on, as you know, Japan joined the Axis forces and bombed Pearl Harbour etc and we were in a very serious situation.

I joined the Air Force in mid 1942 in Perth. I did three months basic training which was a toughening up course at Busselton. When that was over I did a short course in Perth then I was sent to Sydney to do a course on electronics. I was quartered at Bondi and did the course at the Ultimo Technical College which lasted several months. Having reasonably good results on the exams I was directed to do a higher course on high frequency radio in Melbourne. We were stationed at the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings at Fitzroy. The technical college was due west from there. I was there for several months also.

But let's have a look just what happened before I got to Sydney. When I reached Melbourne I asked to have leave for about ten days, it was during Macedonian Easter. I was looking for a Macedonian who used to live in Perth, his name was Stoiche Stoichev*,* and his family. Stoiche Stoichev was one of the most staunchest Macedonian supporters and a very close friend from Perth. I dropped off at the railway station in Melbourne and being a stranger to Melbourne I went straight to the police station. I walked in, and as soon as I walked in the sergeant at the reception there said "What can I do for you, blue orchid", because normally they used to call the

servicemen in the Air Force blue orchids because of the uniform. I said “I’ve come here looking for a friend of mine. He used to live in Perth.” And I gave him the name, Stoiche Stoichev. I said “A Macedonian.” He said “As you know, Melbourne is a city of over 2.5 million people. It’s not an easy place to know who and where they are.” I said “Do you know of any Macedonians at all?” He said “Yes, we know of a Macedonian who’s got a hamburger bar in Queen Street”. And that was the first time that I met Risto Altin. I said to the policeman “Well, look I’m a stranger, I don’t know where this place is, how will I get there?” He looked at me, and he said “Being in the Air Force, we’ll do something for you”. I said “What can you do for me?” he said “We’ll take you there”. So they put me in a police car, myself and two policemen, and we went straight to Risto Altin’s hamburger bar. When the police car stopped there and I got out and the police stood by. It must have been a shock to Risto Altin and his partner. When I walked in and I said to him “Dali ste vie Makedontsi?. Are you Macedonian?” he said “Yes”. And I said “Do you know a man called Stoiche Stoichev?” Risto Altin’s eyes lit up and he said “Of course I know him,” he said. “He’s a good Macedonian.” So I said to Risto “I’ll thank the policemen who brought me here and I’ll come back”. I thanked the two policemen who brought me there and I stayed with Risto Altin and I said to him “I want you to take me to Stoiche Stoichev”.

Eventually we went to Stoiche Stoichev. We hadn’t seen each other for about four or five years. So I went back to the railway station with the intention of leaving but on second thoughts I thought we are close to the Macedonian Easter, maybe I should stay there. Risto Altin and Stoiche Stoichev came with me to the station and they implored me to stay there for the Macedonian Easter. So I decided to stay. I was invited to the Easter Vecherinka or gathering they had. It was in Fitzroy in Gertrude Street, first floor up, Only a very small hall, it was packed with Macedonians, young and old. Risto Altin and Stoiche Stoichev made a few short speeches and they insisted that I say something to the young people there and the old people. Being in uniform, it was more or less unbelievable that a Macedonian was in the Air Force. I got up and said a few words in Macedonian and also a few words in English and I asked the Macedonian people to stay united and we would achieve something. I stayed in Melbourne for about eight days. My leave time expired. I had to depart for Sydney but I enjoyed the evening and I will never forget the way I was received by the Macedonian people in Melbourne.

What happened then?

Actually, as I said, I was going all the way to Sydney. On completion of the course in Sydney I was transferred to Melbourne. On completing the course on high frequency radio, from Melbourne I was sent back to Perth on pre embarcation leave. I was home for only a week and from there went to Darwin, then a place called Batchelor, approximately 30 kilometres south of Darwin. Darwin had been bombed by the Japanese. Australia suffered a number of casualties but also quite a number of ships were sunk in the harbour. Batchelor was a very large base and the Japanese had tried to bomb Batchelor on a number of occasions but they couldn’t locate it because of the low cloud or actually you could say perpetual fog. Once you got to about 10,000 feet up you cannot see the ground. Soon after that I was posted to Dutch Timor. The

Japanese had surrendered and I was at Dutch Timor at the Panfooi Air Strip working on radio transmitters.

Michael Veloskey in the Airforce.

As the war had finished and virtually all servicemen were on their way home, I was put on a plane from Timor back to Darwin. I was in Darwin for about eight or nine days and from Darwin I came to Sydney with a ship called Menora, which was a cargo ship but it had been converted to a troop carrier with a couple of guns in front. I arrived in Sydney in April 1946. It was very cold. I felt very cold because of the tropical conditions we were at before. I stayed in Sydney for approximately a week. There were some Macedonians in Katoomba so I decided to see them. One of them became my future brother-in-law, by the name of Jim Bonakey. I came back to Sydney and then from Sydney went to Melbourne. I met Macedonians again in Melbourne. We had a few discussions regarding the organizations. Risto Altin was very enthusiastic about spreading the organizations throughout Australia. Stoiche Stoichev, Todor Petrov and many others. From there I went to Adelaide and I met former friends who used to live in Perth, Vasil Boscov and his brother. I asked them how would they feel to form a Macedonian organization in Adelaide and they said they were willing to do it and soon after they formed the branch in Adelaide.

So, back to Perth. As soon as I got back to Perth I participated in the activities of the Macedonian group Edinstvo. Soon we decided to have a radio session and after some discussion etc I was elected to be the speaker on the radio. It was a Labor station. The first session was on a Wednesday from quarter past seven till half past seven. I spoke in English on the Macedonian question - about the Macedonians in the Balkans and about the Macedonians in Australia. This caused havoc amongst the Greeks - they got a shock. And in Perth most of the Greeks came from one particular area, an Island called Castelorizo. They protested to the radio station and they even

threatened us for putting on these radio sessions. These radio speeches continued for several weeks and eventually we decided that we'd have a paper as well. So Makedonska Iskra was born.

Why was Makedonska Iskra launched and what did it achieve?

Well, in those days the only paper that the Macedonians received was an American paper and I think it was Tribuna. And it was a pro Bulgarian paper. The Greeks had their own paper there, the Serbs had their own paper there, the Croats had their own paper there, the Italians had their own paper there, and we were the only ones without a paper or a journal of any kind to inform our people of what was going on. When Makedonska Iskra was published the first time, the people received it with great enthusiasm. Although it was not professionally done because we had never published a paper before, the people were thrilled. We posted a number of copies to Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Canberra and, as a matter of fact, we posted some copies overseas as well. To places like Skopje and other countries: Canada, United States of America. It was the beginning of the expansion of the Macedonians in Australia and Makedonska Iskra played a vital part to awaken the people of Macedonian origin in Australia.

Who was behind the publication of the newspaper?

Behind the publication was Ilia Malko, Stoian Sarbinov, Kiro Angelkov, Naum Sharin and myself. The first issue was published in Macedonian and also in English. And as I said it was very successful and the people accepted it enthusiastically.

Also with the Macedonian Spark or Makedonska Iskra as we called it, it was very important to have it published in Australia, because as events took place there was no other way to inform the Macedonians in say Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, wherever they were. By publishing the paper, which was eagerly received and was passed from person to person so they could read and see what was happening. So it played a vital role to get our community together. Soon after that we launched a special campaign to get money to build a hospital in the Republic of Macedonia. In a very short time we managed to open branches throughout Australia. As a matter of fact within nine months we had 53 branches in Australia.

Were they Edinstvo branches?

No. Edinstvo was the original one and we gradually spread out.

But what sort of branches were they?

Actually we also formed an organization called Macedonian Australian People's League. And that was the main body or central body. Edinstvo was the body in Perth. When we formed this other organization, it spread throughout Australia and the branches were actually members of this organization, Makedono Avstraliski Naroden Sojuz.

So when we decided to collect this money for the hospital, a committee was formed in Perth and also committees were formed in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney etc. In a very very short time we managed to collect £11,500. In those days, I'm talking about 1947, in Perth with eleven and a half thousand pounds you could have bought at least 20 three bedroom homes. So you can see, it's not the amount of money but the value. Our people were so enthusiastic. Although they were not financially well off, but they gave whatever they could. The money was collected and eventually sent to Skopje. We had receipts from the Red Cross. The way it was sent, also from the banks, and also acknowledged by the government of Skopje. So this is documented and I believe that the money was used together with the money that was sent from Canada and the United States of America and other places to build a wing at the Skopje Hospital.

Makedonska Iskra was published just after the start of the Greek Civil War and the simultaneous Macedonian War of Independence in Aegean Macedonia. How strong was the Macedonian desire for freedom?

The Macedonian desire for freedom was terrific, not only in one part of Macedonia but the total part of Macedonia - because as you know Macedonia was divided into four parts under Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs and part of it under Albania - so we were thrilled that we thought that this war could be won, with the communists and the other groups that were fighting in the civil war, and we were promised complete freedom. But unfortunately, in my opinion, I believe that some of the communists in Greece, in Bulgaria and even the Serbs were not honest enough and did not carry out the promises that they promised the Macedonian people. But the spirit of the Macedonian people in Australia was extremely high and I believe that the spirit in Macedonia itself was very high - hoping that at last we'll have a free Macedonia to be friends with all our neighbours. None of the Macedonian people wanted to be enemies with either Bulgarians, or the Greeks or the Serbs or the Albanians.

How did the Macedonians in Greece divide in terms of those who fought for an independent Macedonia, those who fought for communism, and those who did not fight?

I would say that the majority of the Macedonians, in Aegean Macedonia especially, all believed and fought for an independent Macedonia. I would say that at least 80-90 per cent of the people thought that way and believed that way and fought for this particular reason. The people who didn't fight probably were too old or didn't understand what was going on and they took no action. Unfortunately the greatest losses during that particular time were in Aegean Macedonia and the areas which suffered the most would be Kostursko okolia and Lerinska okolia. Many of the villages especially in the Kosturska okolia were devastated. Whole villages were either burnt by incendiary bombs, napalm bombs, that the children and the inhabitants had to flee the villages to save their lives. To me it's a tragedy that the world does not recognize or want to recognize; it's very sad.

Were the Greek communists sincere in their promise of an autonomous Macedonia within Greece or did they trick and betray the Macedonians?

I believe that's a very tricky question to answer accurately, but I do honestly believe that some of the true communists in Greece were sincere when they said they would give the Macedonians autonomy under Greece, but there were the others who were traitors, they used the Macedonians to do their hard battles and that's where the losses were very great and our people suffered heavily and paid the penalty for trusting people who they shouldn't have trusted. As you know, the war carried on and as I said before many many Macedonian villages were completely obliterated by Napalm bombs and also other bombings as well. The villagers had to flee, even today if you go to these areas of Kosturska okolia and Lerinska okolia, many of the villages are completely deserted.

You were also one of the founders of the Macedonian Australian Ex-Servicemen's League. When did this form and what did it achieve?

The Macedonian Australian Ex-Servicemen's League was formed in late 1947 and the founders were Ilia Malko, myself, and several others. It was a membership throughout Australia of Macedonians who were in the services. The main aim of that was to keep in touch and to help with any other work that was necessary. It was a voice that could be heard and it was a voice that did carry some weight when speaking to government officials. The Macedonian Australian Ex-Servicemen's League is still active. It was active been 1999 and 2003 when we took action against a Greek paper in Sydney which printed some nasty material which was provocative, which was not true and we took them to the Anti-Discrimination Board and Administrative Decisions Tribunal. We had reasonable success there, although we did not win the case, but this showed that we were prepared to fight for the rights of the Macedonians.

In December 1947 you and your family left for an 11 month visit to the Republic of Macedonia. What was your purpose and what were your experiences there?

As I mentioned before, the Macedonian nationalistic spirit was afire and I was one of them as well and also many other Macedonians. So in 1947, in December, my family and I returned to Macedonia on the ship Partizanka. There were 57 Macedonians aboard. 50 were Macedonians from Egejska (Aegean) Macedonia, Kosturska okolia and Lerinska okolia.

The purpose was to help with the reconstruction of Macedonia, being trained technically in a position to help with radio, and it was one of the main reasons why I and the family went to Macedonia, in Skopje. We arrived there January 1948. It was winter time. We landed in Dubrovnik which is a tourist resort as most people know in the Adriatic Sea, Croatian territory. Dubrovnik had been devastated during the war but the people received us enthusiastically. We spent several days there. A delegation from Skopje came and met us and soon we boarded a train and we arrived in Skopje. I'll never forget it. It was winter, cold, but no snow. As we got off the train we had Macedonian flags. It was pouring rain and we marched from the railway station through the heart of Skopje to the Roman bridge, on the river Vardar. The streets were absolutely choc-a-bloc with people from Skopje receiving us. The rain didn't seem to worry them and it didn't seem to worry us; the spirit was so high, I'll never

forget it. As I said, we marched with the Macedonian flag all the way from the railway station in pouring rain to the Roman bridge across the Vardar.

How was the formation of the Republic of Macedonia seen by the Macedonians in Australia?

Most Macedonians including myself, thought now this is the beginning, once we have a republic, which should be autonomous or free, then the push should come from there for the rest of Macedonia to be united. But unfortunately that did not eventuate and we feel betrayed, we feel let down by all the Balkan countries that promised us so much and gave the Macedonian people very little.

What were your experiences in Skopje?

After about two or three weeks being in Skopje I was allocated a job with a radio station in Skopje. The radio studio was in the heart of Skopje and the transmission station was about 10 kilometres outside Skopje. This transmitter was the most powerful and the best in the Balkans including Belgrade, Athens and Sofia and any other. It was used to transmit news throughout the Balkan areas. I enjoyed working in the radio station and also the radio studio. The group working there were terrific. One of the young boys, Blagoi Pekevski, was only about 20. His brother was a Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture in Skopje. He was a very proud young boy and a very good Macedonian. We met quite a number of people. There was one particular person I've got to mention who was from Canada. Her name was Mary Vasilova. She was a union delegate in Canada to the restaurant industry. She was a very bright young girl. We had quite a number of sessions talking about the Macedonian question. Also what we thought should happen to the Macedonians in Aegean Macedonia. She departed for Canada about six months later. I did not keep in touch with her and I don't know to this day whether this young lady is still alive or not.

During my work in Skopje, when I was at the transmitting station, if I worked for three consecutive days it was classed as nine days, because you worked from eight o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock the next day – it was classed as three shifts although we did not work all the time, we had to have some sleep. That gave me the opportunity to travel throughout Macedonia and also through part of Serbia and Croatia. I went to Bitola and I had a look at the city or town of Bitola and also met some of the people there. In those days it was virtually impossible to travel freely because of the civil war. You had to have a special pass. I traveled with a British passport because in those days we had no Australian passports. I also went to a place called Bulkez, which is virtually on the border of Romania, Hungary and Serbia. At this particular place there were Greek and Macedonian partisans recovering from their wounds. It was virtually like a country within a country. They had their own money, they had their own hospitals, they had their own little factories and they also had schools there. There were quite a large number of young children, Macedonians and some Greeks as well. I met the committee there who welcomed me warmly. I stayed there for four days and then I came back to Skopje.

For several weeks you visited Aegean Macedonia, what were your experiences?

The experiences were devastating. I went down and the civil war was still in progress. I wanted to see my birthplace again, and I went down accompanied by experienced partisans who were Vera Baleva and Mihail Kermejidata*,* also Pascal Mitrovski from Chuka. They took me across the border. I accompanied them and eventually we reached our village but I was not able to get into the village. But I got as far as Sveti Ilia – which I mentioned in the earlier discussion, our little church was still there. From there I could virtually see with binoculars the village, people etc and also there were quite a few troops, Greek troops there, and they also had cannons there. It was very dangerous for me to venture into the village. Then we went to several other villages like Chuka and a few others as well and to my dismay I could see that the devastation amongst the Macedonian villages was very great. People had left the villages, children, elderly people, and they were crossing the border towards Albania, towards the Republic of Macedonia, and very few apparently, into Bulgaria.

Now I only stayed in Aegean Macedonia for several days, not weeks, and eventually we got back. When I got back to Skopje I was able to get back to the job that I had. I met many of the young boys and girls who were going through Macedonia to the other republics like Czechoslovakia, Romania, even as far as Russia. They were the young children that were forced to flee their villages in the towns because of the terror and bombings etc.

That's the detsa begaltsi [child refugees]?

Yes, as we call it in Macedonian, detsa begaltsi, because I don't call it detsa begalstsi, I call it Detsa-*forced*-to-flee-their-homes-because-of-the-terrible-devastation. This was a tragedy to see hundreds and hundreds of young people, virtually barefooted young children, elderly people, virtually in rags and tatters fleeing their homeland. It was a devastating experience for me, I cried.

Many of these people, youngsters and elderly people, you could call them refugees if you like, initially they were put into the Skopje stadium, the sports ground you could say. They were housed there for two or three nights. I visited them regularly. Then from there they were taken to a place called Matka. Matka is an area about 30 or 40 kilometres away from Skopje. It's a hydro centre, they have hydro electricity produced there, but there's also a number of monasteries there. So these people, these children and these elderly people in rags and tatters that needed clothing, also fumigating because they were full of lice, they were taken to these monasteries usually for about eight or ten days. They were fumigated, they were fed well, they were clothed and eventually they were put on their way to go to these other republics, which accepted them as refugees. It was heartbreaking to see all these young people go that way, without parents some of them, without a mother or a father. That's shocking.

Soon after you decided to return to Australia. What did you do when you returned to Perth?

We came back with the same ship that we came to Macedonia, with the Partizanka, but this time it was not a happy trip like the one when we were going there. There was a small number of people that were on the Partizanka and I was one of them with my family. From there we went to Malta and from Malta to Cyprus and from Cyprus to Australia. We stopped in Perth. My mother and my sister came to Sydney but I stopped in Perth because the people wanted me to tell them all about the situation in Macedonia. So a meeting was arranged in Perth for me. There were a large number of Macedonian people came to hear and to hear the truth about the situation in Macedonia. I also went to Manjimup. Another meeting was held there, the people were very enthusiastic to hear what was going on. Back to Perth for another meeting and from there to Kalgoorlie where a meeting was held and I also gave them the information of what was transpiring in the Republic of Macedonia and also of the tragedy of the civil war. From there I went to Adelaide, also a meeting in Adelaide. From there to Melbourne and eventually I came to Sydney where I have settled since then, since 1949. I've been active since returning from Macedonia in the Macedonian community and I am still active at my old age.

You helped build the first Macedonian church in Sydney at Rosebery and later also at Cabramatta. What was your role and how did the project develop?

Actually in Sydney we didn't have a Macedonian church and most of our people were going to weddings or christenings in Serbian, Russian or Greek churches because they were Orthodox. So we thought it was about time that the Macedonians in Sydney had their own church. In Melbourne a Macedonian church was already established. So we decided to build a church where it would be very central for the Macedonian community. We had a couple of meetings and in one of those meetings I was elected to be the president of the group with the plan to find a place and build a church for the Macedonians in Sydney. Before we built the church, there was a priest whose name was Mihail Gogov***,*** he was also very active and participated with us. As a matter of fact he officiated in several sermons in Macedonian in the Catholic church and also a Church of England church in George Street. The people flocked to these sermons and we were thrilled with the response, so we decided it was definitely time to build a church in Sydney and we found a suitable place, which was at Rosebery. It was a Church of England church. The church was neglected because the parishioners from there had departed. So we got in touch with the Archbishop of the Church of England, his name was Gough. He was a fantastic person. Normally when you made an appointment to see the Bishop it was 10 to 15 minutes but our delegation, which included one of our bishops and Mihail Gogov and myself. We spent over one and a half hours with the Archbishop. He was exceptionally versed with the Macedonian history. As a matter of fact he knew more about the Macedonian uprising of Ilinden than I did; that was a surprise for me. He was a fantastic bloke, I'll never forget him. He helped us to negotiate to buy the church at Rosebery. As I said, it was only a very small church but in a very nice position with a park in front and a park behind with a reasonable amount of parking which helped us a lot.

When we called a meeting to ask the people whether they agreed to buy the church property there or not, the response was terrific. The people unanimously decided that we should buy it and we called another meeting later on to collect the money. But in

the meantime a group of two of us was elected to go and see the property managers of the Church of England in Sydney. We did that, it was only a verbal agreement or a contract you could say, the amount was just over $30,000, which was a very very good price for the property that we intended to build a new Macedonian church.

There were no papers drawn, no contract drawn, just a verbal [agreement] and handshake to buy the property. The people who were very anti Macedonian - I'm not going to name any groups - we heard that they approached the Church of England property managers and offered them ten times more than the money we paid in order to stop us from having a Macedonian church. And what we did hear was this, that the people who managed the property of Church of England told them no money would change the contract; they would stick by their word because the Macedonians needed their church in Sydney.

So, I was the first president elected by the people and we managed to get a certain amount of money and we borrowed a small amount of money from the bank. We bought the church and the people flocked to the church. There'd be big crowds of Macedonians going every Sunday. Weddings and christenings were performed. In a very short time we saved enough money to plan for the new church which is in the Rosebery property now. The cost was quite substantial. We tried to get different people such as architects to help us with the project and eventually, I must say this, it was a Serbian architect who gave us the best price to supervise the building of the church. Most of the other people including some Macedonians, what they asked was far too high. He supervised, planned and also attended every week, at least once, to supervise with the building. He only asked for $4,000, that was virtually a gift. So the church was built and within a short time we also had enough money to put a deposit and buy the property at Cabramatta. And eventually the property at Cabramatta was built and we had another church at Cabramatta.

When the foundation stone was laid for Rosebery we had invited quite a number of prominent people in Sydney including government people, Premier of NSW, Neville Wran; Willis, the opposition leader of the Liberal Party; former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, and we also invited other members from the federal parliament and they attended. But also we invited other religious bodies. A Catholic priest was there, and a Syrian priest was there, Antioch priest was there, but unfortunately the Serbians refused to participate and so did the Greeks. We invited them as a religious body, so we didn't worry too much about that. Eventually when the actual church was opened it was opened by the then Premier of NSW, Neville Wran. Federal members who attended were Mr Whitlam, and Mrs McKellar representing her husband who was a Minister. There were a lot of other dignitaries from the state and federal sphere. It was a great day for the Macedonian people of Sydney to have their own church which eventually proclaimed a cathedral.

I would also like to mention some of the Macedonian activists who helped build the Rosebery and Cabramatta churches: Dragan Razmovski, the second elected president; Kire Razmovski, a very staunch supporter; Todor Vlashis and his wife Elena, who both ceaselessly helped in the church for many years; Elena Kochofska,

Mito Marinovski; Peter Marinovski, son of Mito; Slave Ristevski; Bill Velevski; and many others who contributed financially and physically. Thank you all.

You knew many of the first Macedonian activists in Australia. Who do you think were the key activists and can you tell us a little bit about each one?

First and foremost let us talk about Ilia Malko. Ilia Malko was my very closest friend. We came to Australia together on the same ship and we remained friends till his passing away. I would say that he contributed more than any other Macedonian in Australia to the Macedonian movement. He gave everything towards the Macedonian cause. He believed that Macedonians should live free, as many of us did as well. Unfortunately we lost Ilia Malko roughly about eight years ago.

Risto Altin: he'd be another one who has contributed vastly to the Macedonian cause, he was in Melbourne; and Kiro Angelkov and several others.

Now Ilia Malko was involved right from the very beginning in Perth in the organization Edinstvo, also the Macedonian Spark, Makedonska Iskra, and also in the formation of the Ex-Services League, Macedonian Australia Ex Servicemen's League. Also the Macedonian Australian People's League, which functioned and also helped a lot towards the unity of the Macedonians.

Risto Altin was in Melbourne and as mentioned before I met Risto Altin in late 1942. He was involved in all the Macedonian activities in Melbourne. He was also involved in the Macedonian Spark, as the Macedonian Spark eventually was transferred from Perth to Melbourne. He was also involved with the Macedonian church in Melbourne, in Gertrude Street. He was a staunch Macedonian and still is.

Kiro Angelkov joined the association or Macedonian organizations in late '45, '46. He spoke better Macedonian than I or Ilia Malko. He was a very staunch Macedonian and he also helped with the Macedonian Spark and also with the organization, and also helped with the Macedonian hospital campaign.

Stoian Sarbinov. Stoian Sarbinov was a man from a village called Buf, Egejska Makedonija. He was at Manjimup. Originally he opposed us in Perth because he didn't think that we would be sincere but eventually he came around and he was very very helpful and he also helped a lot in the Macedonian Spark, he helped with the printing, he helped put the paper together. He also took a very active part in human rights in Macedonian affairs throughout Australia. Unfortunately Stoian Sarbinov passed away about fifteen years ago. We lost another good supporter.

Vasil Boscov, he was an elderly man, he passed away about 20 years ago. He was involved right from the beginning. I knew Vasil Boscov from Perth. I also knew Vasil Boscov when he went to Adelaide and also helped to form the Adelaide branch of the Macedonian Australian People's League. He participated in helping with the printing of the paper, he also helped with the other social activities and he also was a secretary for some time.

Stoiche Stoichev. He was a very ardent, staunch supporter of the Macedonian cause throughout his life. He used to be in Perth at the beginning. He brought his wife and family from Macedonia, eventually transferred from Perth to Melbourne where he participated in all the activities of the Macedonian life. He passed away unfortunately several years back.

Todor Todorov and his father, they were both from Pirinska Macedonia, from Macedonia under Bulgarian occupation and rule. Right from the beginning Todor Todorov and his father helped with the formation of Edinstvo, helped with the formation of the Macedonian Dancing Group and also helped with the social activities.

John Pizarkov was one of the first that helped with the Macedonian Edinstvo in Perth. Eventually he joined the army. When he joined the army he was transferred to the eastern states and eventually settled in Sydney where he participated in helping with the Macedonian Spark and also the other social activities of Macedonians throughout Australia.

Naum Sharin, an elderly person, a very nice person who passed away several years ago. He was one of the first to join the Macedonian Edinstvo in Perth. He helped when most of us were in the services - he was an elderly bloke - to keep the organization alive. We've got to say thank you to him for doing that.

Boris Mano, he was a younger person from Macedonian Prespa under Albanian rule. He was one of the first members. He helped with the social life and social activities in Perth.

Naum Mano, related to Boris Mano, he was also from Prespa, Albania. He was one of the first members to join the Edinstvo organization.

Lazo, the brother of Naum, he was also a member right from the beginning, who helped the social life and also in helping with the paper.

Naum Kalchunov, he used to be in a city or town called York, about 100 odd kilometres away from Perth. He was a staunch Macedonian supporter. He helped by donating quite a bit of money towards the Macedonian hospital and also towards the Macedonian Spark or Makedonska Iskra.

There's also many others who at present have slipped my memory, so I must say without hesitation - without the mentioned people our organization would have been much poorer, so vechno da bidi pametot na ovie lugje koi se pochinati [long may we remember these people who have passed away].

You went back to your village in 1983. How long were you there for and what did you see?

Let me give you a brief outline before I went to the village. On a number of occasions I tried to go to my village, my birthplace, but unfortunately I couldn't get a visa. You're aware, the Greek government refuses a visa to anybody with a Macedonian name. As

my name was changed from the Greek name, which they called Eliopoulos, back to the original and present name, Veloskey, I was refused entry.

When Greece joined the European Community, like many other European community countries no visa was required. So the wife and I, without telling anyone except our family, decided to board the plane and we landed in Athens. It was five o'clock in the morning. I showed my passport to the person in charge of the entry into the airport, and he looked at it and on my passport it says my name, Michael Veloskey, "Born Macedonia", nothing else. He was rather stunned. He looked at it and he kept on looking at it. And I said "What's the trouble? It's an Australian passport," in English. He said in Greek "No understand English." I said "Can you speak Greek?" He said "Yeah". So I said "Yes," I spoke to him in Greek, I said "this is an Australian passport. That's [refering to Macedonia] where I was born." It was early in the morning. I think they hadn't checked up the blacklist of my name, because it was a different name altogether, and he let us through.

We stayed in Athens for several days. We saw the ruins, the congestion and the smog. 1983 was a warmest summer in Europe for 300 years. Many people in Athens suffered badly from the pollution and also from the heat. After leaving Athens we decided to go to the village that I was born. To go there, I went to a small office asking them for two air fares to go to my village. The nearest airport was Rupishta, which is adjacent to Kostur. The person there stared at me in amazement. I said "Rupishta, don't you know where it is?" He said "No." He said "Never heard of it". I said "Well, unfortunately" I said, "the Greek governments have changed the names of virtually all Macedonian towns and villages" and I said "If you give me a map I'll show you". So he gave me the map and I showed him where it was. It was under a different name. So Rupishta is not called Rupishta any more.

Eventually he gave us two tickets, our tickets. We boarded the plane and we landed at Rupishta. It was a boiling hot day, the temperature was well over 45°. We called a taxi. We got in the taxi and we asked him to get us into Kostur, as the Greeks call it Kastoria, to a nice hotel. He took us to a reasonably nice hotel with views of the lake. Kostur is a very very picturesque town with a population of approximately 20,000. Many of the people in the Kostur area were engaged in the fur industry, which was thriving but gradually diminishing.

Anyway we settled in the hotel and eventually we called for a taxi to show us around. He was a Macedonian who spoke both Greek and Macedonian but he insisted to speak more Greek than Macedonian because he was one of the unfortunate boys. He lost his parents and the Greeks took him and they made him like a Yanitsar, Yanitsar means extremely pro Greek, they instilled… they brainwashed him. So we said to him "Would you like to drive us around for the next fortnight, around the villages?". He agreed. We said "We'll pay you for the whole day, you take us there and back, and any spare time you can utilize it". So we engaged him for a fortnight.

We went to quite a number of villages, to the village that I was born, and as we drove through there, Dolna Mala, as we call it, I saw a man with a stick in his hand and he was walking slowly and he was cursing in Macedonian and Greek. I remembered the

name, his name was Lazo. I was rather surprised to see him still alive because he would be in his 85s or 90s. So I said to the taxi driver “Pull up here”. He pulled up, the wife and I were both together in the taxi. I got out of the taxi and I said “Lazo, me poznavash mene?” [Lazo, do you remember me?] He looked at me. “Koi vrak si?” [in Macedonian “Which devil are you?”]. “Diavolos” [in Greek ‘Devil”]. I said “Eh, jus sum Makedonets. (Eh, I am a Macedonian]. And he looked at me and he looked at me and he couldn’t make me out. I said “You don’t remember.” I said “I left in 1935” and I told him who I was. He put his arms around me and he started to cry.

And this particular man Lazo said “I’m going to stay with you all day today.” So we took him with us in the taxi and he took us to my home that my father had built there and it was occupied by my uncle and his family. Unfortunately my uncle was not there but only his wife was there and she welcomed us and she said that her husband, Risto, Chris, was going to be there late this afternoon or the next day. So I asked the taxi driver to drive us to Gorna Mala and that’s where my aunty lived from my mother’s side, Teta Zoia. She welcomed us there and she insisted that we stay there for the night. My uncle, her husband, was tilling the land. Her son was in Kostur and he was involved in the fur industry as well but he spent most of his time in Germany trading between Germany and Greece. So we stayed there for the night and her son came home and also the husband came home. We were welcome there, they made us stay there for the night, they gave us a very nice meal.

So, the next morning the son was driving us down to Dolna Mala, to the house my uncle occupied, and as we were going down the hill on the road there was an elderly person with a walking stick coming up. That was my uncle Chris. So the driver said “Do you know who that man is?” I said “No.” He said “We’ll stop here”. So we stopped, he got out, and he went to my uncle Chris, that’s my father’s brother, and he said to him “Imam eden chovek tuka koj te poznava tebe.” [“I have a man here who knows you.”] He said to my uncle “There’s somebody with me in the car who recognizes you and knows you and is also your relative”. I got out of the car and I went to meet him there. He looked at me. To me he seemed to have shrunken a lot, because as we get older we always lose a bit of weight, but the thing that I’ll never forget is his sparkling blue eyes. I’ve never seen eyes like that. Anyhow I explained to him who I was. He wrapped his arms around me and we both cried.

Anyhow we had a bit of a talk and I asked him where he was going. He said he was going to do a bit of shopping in Gorna Mala, that’s where the stores were. So we drove him there. We had a bit of a talk and we drove him back and when we got back to the house he said “The house is still half yours.” I said “Uncle, you can have the lot.” I said “I don’t think I’ll be ever coming back to live here,” and he started to cry again. His wife was there. She welcomed us and saying that the house was still half ours. So we stayed there for quite a while and then we decided to go back to my aunty’s place in Gorna Mala**.** Her son drove us up there. So we stayed there for the next day and the night.

Eventually we decided to go to some of the other villages. Drenichevo. Drenichevo is the nearest village to Gradche. The Greeks had called it “Kranohori”. Unfortunately this particular village, before the war or actually before 1921 or ’22, about 99 per cent

of the people were Macedonians. But during the Greek-Turkish conflict when they exchanged nationals, quite a number of the Pontian Greeks were planted in the village Drenichevo. And I would say probably about 30 per cent of the village people of Drenichevo, of Kranohori, are Pontian Greeks and they were the eyes and the ears and they were the spies, not all of them, for the fascist Greek government during the civil war and before the civil war etc.

We went there and we met some people there, also met some of my relatives there. Unfortunately my uncle from my mother's side had lost his life. His two sons, one of them got killed during the civil war, and the other was in Skopje. So we took the liberty of asking if they knew what part of Skopje. They didn't know. But eventually when we got to Skopje we met with my cousin there. Drenichevo is a fairly large village, and the population has actually increased to what it was pre war or pre civil war as well. But the village Gradche has diminished to a very very small number. I think the number at present or at the time when we were there in '83 it was about 48 only.

So eventually we went to some other villages as well, but we went back again to my village after Drenichevo and I met with my uncle again, uncle Chris. And he told me a terrible terrible story. He told me how he called his donkey in Macedonian Choonksh [Stop!] and a Greek policeman or korofilakas heard him. So he took his name and they summonsed him to go to court in Kostur. Eventually the court case proceeded. My uncle could speak very little Greek because, he was my father's brother as I said, and he was born under the Ottoman occupation. He could speak very few words in Greek so they had to have an interpreter for him at the court. When the prosecutor asked the interpreter to ask my uncle why did he speak this forbidden language, and my uncle said "Well, it's like this, my animals can only understand Macedonian, therefore if I spoke another language they wouldn't know what I was saying to them." Anyhow the prosecution pressed the case and eventually the judge said "Have you anything else to say?" and my uncle said "Yes," he said "You should open schools for the old people to learn Greek and you should also open schools for the animals to learn Greek". The judge was furious with his answer and sentenced him to five years in gaol. For a very elderly person to be in gaol for five years, you can imagine how terrible it must have been. But they never broke his spirit. That's very important. They never broke his spirit. And he said "They can do whatever they like. I was born a Macedonian and I'll die a Macedonian". So as you can see, they'll never ever break the Macedonian spirit entirely, it doesn't matter what they do.

After visiting several other villages in our area we decided to go to my wife's village, which is called Konomladi (Makrohori in Greek). In Konomladi Helen's uncle was still alive, that is Helen's father's brother. And he also told us what happened to him. The Greeks hung him upside down by the legs and they beat him and they beat him and they left him for dead. The family cut him down. He was all black and blue from the severe beating that he had. They took him home and they wrapped him in sheep wool and also sheep skin and he was in that state for several weeks, hovering between death and life. His will must have been tremendous. He eventually got better but he never recovered from the terrible beating that he had. He is a man of great spirit, he is a man of understanding. He'll do anything to help people. We stayed there for two nights, we enjoyed our visit to his place and also meeting his family. It's very sad to

see the terrible things that have taken place during the last 40 or 50 years in Aegean Macedonia.

When did the Greeks beat him, and why?

Well, I was informed by my wife, Helen, because she was still there before she came to Australia, they beat him because he was in a group which was organizing the Macedonians and apparently that was the reason why they beat him like that.

This happened at the beginning of the Greek Civil War and what were the circumstances that led to him being caught?

Well apparently what happened was that an informer that heard and knew that my wife's uncle was in a committee that was organizing the Macedonians for the Macedonian movement, Autonomous Macedonia, and also Macedonia for the Macedonians, and that was the main reason why they beat him and they left him for dead.

Can you tell us a little about your wife's family?

My mother-in-law, that is Helen's mother, during the civil war she was one of the persons who helped to carry the wounded partisans and when they found out about that my mother-in-law was gaoled for five years in an underground prison in Athens. It was a terrible hardship and something that virtually destroyed her life. Eventually, my father-in-law managed to bring his wife to Australia but she did not live much longer after arriving in Australia. It was part and parcel of the terrible tragedy of being in gaol for five years under tremendous, horrific pressures and degradation.

Also my wife's brother, he was a partisan. He got wounded severely and the Greeks captured him and they threw him in the gutter for dead. In actual fact a Greek priest went by him, he saw him there, he spat on him, he kicked him, time and time again, tried to extinguish his life. Eventually a Greek soldier who was a bit more humane got hold of my brother-in-law and took him to hospital where they amputated his leg. When he got better they transferred him from the hospital to one of the islands and he was imprisoned for seven years for being a partisan. He was only doing his duty as a Macedonian and also as a duty for freedom and democracy - seven years in gaol. Eventually he was released and came to Australia. His experience and tortures and trauma ended his life at a premature age, that's all I've got to say.

After visiting my wife's village, we came back to Kostur or Kastoria as the Greek call it and enjoyed the area and also I met some people that we knew from Sydney, and they took us to their home, we had a couple of meetings with them.

Eventually we decided that we would go to Salonika but not by plane but by vehicle, by car or a taxi so we could see the countryside. So we engaged the taxi driver who we had with us for some considerable time by now. We got to know him and his name was Vane, John. He was driving a French car as a taxi and he kept on playing Greek music mainly, but every now and then he played a Macedonian cassette. I kept on

talking to him about Macedonia and all that, both in Greek and Macedonian. What actually happened, he had been told by the Greeks that his father and mother had been killed by the partisans. He was only a very young boy at the age of about three or thereabouts, so the Greeks had taken this young boy and they made him a Yanitsar in other words, to be hateful of anything else but Greek. I kept on talking to him about Macedonia and Macedonians and all that and I was so interested that I decided to go back to the village and check up why his parents were killed and by whom. I was told that his parents were not killed by anyone because they stepped on a land mine and that killed them. So I kept on talking to this young taxi driver regarding Macedonia and all that and eventually he started to think. I didn't say anymore. I said "Now I want you to drive us from here to Salonika", as I mentioned before.

The first stop was at Voden. The Greeks had renamed the town Edessa. It's a beautiful town, 90 per cent Macedonians but afraid to speak Macedonian. When we got there, there was sort of like a coffee shop and also a little store selling a few groceries and also selling films. So I said to my wife "I'll go and buy another film because the one I have is used up". As I went there I saw the person behind the counter. I spoke to him in English. He shook his head, naturally because he couldn't speak English, and I spoke to him in Greek. When he answered me in Greek I could see his Greek was only broken Greek and I said to him in a very low tone and very low voice so I wouldn't be heard "Dali si Makedonets?" [Are you a Macedonian?] He said *"*Da, Makedonets sum, pa da ne zborvash, ke ne shtyue.*"* Don't talk aloud because they might hear ustalking Macedonian and I'll get into trouble. He said "Come around the back". So we went around the back and he opened up. It was absolutely disastrous what had happened to the Macedonians under Greek control. They've been devastated, they've been traumatized, they've been brutalized. And as far as the Greeks keep on saying that democracy was born in Greece, I wish they'd kept some of the democracy for themselves. Eventually I parted with him and I thanked him, and I said "Don't forget you're a Macedonian, it doesn't matter what happens." He said *"*Do koga disham, jas ke bidam Makedonets*".* "As long as I'm breathing," he said "I'll never change from being a Macedonian".

So we left Voden, it's a beautiful place, as I mentioned before, and all the way from there to Salonika or Thessaloniki as the Greeks call it, the plain of Solun as I call it is very fertile. They can grow virtually anything – fruit, vegetables, wheat, corn, you name it. And we bought quite a bit of fruit because it was the right season and we kept on driving and got as far as Pella,. When we got to Pella, I said to the taxi driver, "I want to stop here." He said "Why?" I said "Don't you know?' He said "Oh, I heard about it." I said "These are areas which are of historical value regarding Macedonian history." He said "What do you mean, Macedonian history?" I said "Well, this is Macedonia, this is not Greece". So we stopped. We spent about four hours at Pella and looked at some of the ruins there and I said to him "These are ruins from Philip, Alexander's father, Alexander the Great." "Oh yes," he said. "Alexander the Great, Megas Alexandros*.*" "No, no" I said "Not Megas Alexandros, Veliki Alexandar*,"* I said to him.

Anyhow we continued to Salonika. We got there. As we were driving I said to him "Now John or Vane, I want you to take us to the best hotel they've got in Salonika, Solun." He said "Yes, the name is Makedoniko Palati." Macedonian Palace. I said "John, you just kept on telling me there's no Macedonia and yet right inside the middle of Solun you tell me the best hotel is called Macedonian Palace. There you are," I said. Anyhow, we reached the hotel, we booked in, so I called him up to our room, we got something to eat and I said "How much do we owe you?" So he made the calculations and I gave him a tip and I said "I'll walk you down to the reception". As we went down in the lift I said "John, I have to give you some news which… you will probably be surprised and shocked". He said to me in Greek "Le ye." In other words "Kazi" [Tell]. I said "When we get down, we'll sit down and I'll explain to you". So we went down to the reception, there was a couch on the side. I said "Let's sit on the side so nobody can hear us." And I explained to him what happened about his parents. I told him that his father and mother were not executed by the partisans or not murdered by the partisans but they died by stepping on a land mine. He got a shock. He got up, he wrapped his arms around me, and he started to cry. He said "I was never informed, but inside me I felt there was something wrong." "So John, that is the reason," I said. "You can't be anything else but what you are. You're a Macedonian". He wrapped his arms around me, he started to cry.

He had to leave to return to Kostur. We went out of the hotel and I wished him a safe journey back to Kostur, and we parted.

Why was Vane unable to find out why his parents had died?

Actually when I think back and consider the whole situation in regards to this taxi driver Vane, it comes to my mind that the Greeks had Graecized him to such an extent that the people around him were probably afraid to tell him the truth. And I feel that people of the village where John the taxi driver was born were scared to approach him and tell him the facts, what had happened to him, just in case he was still pro-Grkoman [pro- Greek] and informed on them and they could be actually brought to the courts and gaoled. So that is a sad sad situation that has taken place not only with this case but I assume with hundreds of other cases in the Macedonian area under Greek control.

We stayed several days in Salonika. We visited the eastern part of Salonika along the seaside. It's a beautiful area. Salonika itself is by far, far superior as far as quality of life is concerned to Athens. Athens is a much larger city, very congested, very polluted, at the same time, being built virtually in a gully, it's a horrible atmosphere to live in. We stayed in Salonika for as I said for several days and then we decided from Salonika to go to Bulgaria, where my wife and I have relatives. So we decided to get on a bus. We got on a bus and as we reached the Greek-Bulgarian border the passports are collected and they are given to the Bulgarian officer who boards the bus. The Bulgarian officer checked the passports of all the passengers and they were all Greeks going to Sofia. Only the wife and I were Macedonians and I have a habit if I travel in a bus, on a tourist bus, I like to be right at the back of the bus so I can see what goes on in front of me. He checked all the passports from the Greeks and not a word was said, nothing was uttered. When he came to us the Bulgarian officer, he

was a captain in a blue uniform, a man of about 40 or thereabouts or maybe a bit less. When he saw my passport, which said “Michael Veloskey Born Macedonia” he started to yell, “Kakva ta Makedonia”. “There’s no such thing as Macedonia, there’s no Macedonians.” And I was rather surprised and shocked in a way. And I said to him, in simple words “Look here officer, your job is to see if our visas are valid or not. If there is no Macedonia for you, there is Macedonia for me. If you know you’re Bulgarian, I know I’m a Macedonian. So I don’t want to discuss this with you any further. You do your job - to check the visas, that’s all that’s required.” He didn’t say much more after that. He took our passports. When we disembarked from the bus, there was a check on our luggage and they also kept our passports. So we lined up to wait for our passports and also our luggage. So we exchanged money from traveller’s cheques into Bulgarian leva. This particular officer that checked us on the bus came to me and he said “What do you know about politics?” I said “Look here, we came here on a tourist visa, we are here as tourists,” and I said “I don’t want to discuss politics with you but if you insist” I said “ask me”. He said “You don’t know anything about politics.” I said “Well, maybe I don’t know but I’ll ask you a couple of questions, and if I’m wrong I’ll seek your pardon and I’ll bend down on my knees and seek your pardon, but if you are wrong what would you do?” And he said to me in Bulgarian “Kazee, kazee” [Tell me, tell me]. That’s how the Bulgarians talk. And I said in Bulgarian “Ke kazeem, ke kazeem”. And then in Macedonian “Kogato Dimitrov ga pozna Makedonia i Makedontsite, sho stoj pred tebe?” He understood me. I said “If Dimitrov recognized and acknowledged that there’s Macedonians and Macedonia, what stands between you and him. He was a world figure in politics, so what are you going to say?” He had nothing to say. His face went red and he turned around to my wife and he said “You’ve got an angel husband” and I said to him in Macedonian “Tia bugarashki tatarashki, druk da mu kazish.“ “These Bulgarian words that you’re saying, tell them to your villagers, not to me”. And I asked him not to interfere anymore.

In 1993 you were the founding president of the Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia. What were the Association’s objectives and what do you see as its main achievements?

Well as the name implies, Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia, Aegean Macedonians of Australia, a group of Macedonians from Aegean Macedonia plus a couple of others from the Republic of Macedonia, we decided to form the Association with our aim to pursue human rights for the Macedonians not only in Macedonia but also in Australia. We lobbied the parliamentarians of federal parliament and even some of the state parliamentarians and our main aim was to help achieve human rights for the Macadonians in Greece, and that we should be recognized as Macedonians, not as Serbo-Macedonians, not as Fyrom, not as Greek Macedonians. We are what we are, we are Macedonians, proud citizens of Australia, and we should be known and accepted as being Australian citizens of Macedonian background.

Let me mention some of the people who contributed to the Macedonian cause via the Aegean Macedonian Associatoin of Australia. Apart form myself as president, Paul Stephen, founder and vice president; Bill Vlassis, secretary; Victor Bivell and Mile Donevski, great contributors as “think tank” resources; Bill Manos, financial contributor; Steve Malco; Boris Minovski; Atanas Strezovski and many others. Let me

convey my sincere thanks to the Kotori Cultural Club of Richmond for the great financial support and also to many individuals from there.

Much of the Association's work was towards promoting human righs in Greece. What is your view of the Greek government's policy towards the ethnic Macedonians in Aegean Macedonian both in the past and at present?

Unfortunately the past and the present Greek governments, whether socialist or capitalists or whatever they call themselves, have been hypocritical. In my opinion, going back say 70 years the Greek parliaments continuously have frustrated the Macedonian desire to be free, to live in a democratic country in a democratic environment. When you are restricted from speaking your own language, when you are restricted from singing your own songs, when you are restricted from having your own church and sermons in the Macedonian language, how could you call that freedom, how would you call Greek democracy, how could you call the Greek governments democratic governments? To me they are the complete opposite. They always have been, they continue to be hypocritical. They have closed the borders to Macedonians who left during the civil war. If you go back and try to cross the borders even up to today you are refused entry if you have a Macedonian name. If you change your name to a Greek name they'll let you through. I think it's a very sad stage in our era to have this type of government anywhere, let alone in the Balkans. I feel very sad to see what's happening in the Balkans. Not only in Greece but unfortunately similar things are happening in Bulgaria.

What would you like to see happen in Aegean Macedonia?

What I would like to see is that the borders should be completely pulled down, throughout the Balkans, throughout Macedonia, throughout Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Croatia and all the other countries - to be joined in a European community where freedom of travel, freedom of speech, freedom of religious services, freedom of worship, whatever you have, should be for all the people in all of Europe. That is my wish, that is my thought, and I hope that it will come to fruition before I pass away.

How do you see the future of the Macedonian minorities in Greece, Bulgaria and Albania?

Unfortunately, and I'll say it again, unfortunately, as far as I can understand it they have not achieved the freedom they deserve; because Macedonia and Macedonian history dates back longer than any of the other countries that are surrounding them and it's a very sad thing that the world has closed its eyes and does not see what is actually happening to the Macedonian minorities in those countries. It's about time the European Council and the European Union start to shift the pages back and allow the Macedonians to enjoy true freedom with free movement throughout Europe.

What would you like to see happen in the Republic of Macedonia?

In the Republic of Macedonia what I would like to see is this: that the government which is supposed to be for the people, by the people, to stand firm, to stand firm on

the constitution which they originally had which gives freedom to all the peoples in the Republic of Macedonia, even the Albanians. But not to the terrorists; I cannot understand how the Republic of Macedonia has elected members into parliament who were the leaders of the terrorist group of Albanians which caused all these troubles in the Republic of Macedonia. I feel disillusioned, disheartened at what they've done: how can a country declare itself a republic by denying its own flag, by denying its own constitution, or altering its constitution to please some of the neighbours which are undemocratic? In my way of thinking it's this: it's free when you decide to declare yourself independent, you choose a name which you stick to, you choose a flag and if it's a new flag you stick by it. But we have our flag, which dates back over 2,000 years, that's the sun, a rising sun which the Macedonians used to worship in those days. And that is a proper Macedonian flag, not the "ventilator", which they've adopted as our national flag. I'll never accept that and any Macedonian who is a true Macedonian will never accept that. Nor will they accept a constitution where they watered it down saying that the Republic of Macedonia has no right to ask what's taking place in Aegean Macedonia where Macedonians are treated as third or fourth class citizens, denied their rights of religion, of culture, and everything else that goes with freedom. That is my opinion.

What sort of future would you like to see for the Macedonian people?

I would like to see a happy, prosperous future for the Macedonians in the years to come. I would like to see the Macedonians, Serbs, Croatians, Bulgarians, Greeks, even Albanian terrorists realize that they live in that part of the world, that it's better to be friends than to be enemies. You have nothing to gain by being enemies and fighting each other, you have everything to gain by resolving your problems peacefully and in an equal basis, in an equal basis. Respect each other, respect each other's views, respect for what you are. If you're a Macedonian the others should respect you as being a Macedonian. If you are a Serb you should be respected to be a Serb and vice versa. The same with the Greeks. If the Greeks want the Macedonians to respect them as Greeks they should respect the Macedonians and Macedonia. And the Bulgarians and the other ethnic groups around the area, they should have the choice of what they are and nobody should deny them that right.

What are your current involvements in Macedonian affairs?

I am politically active by attending meetings, and also trying to put some input, whatever I can, but at my age, I'm well over 80, I think it's about time that I stepped aside and I think the younger people should take the reigns and I'm quite sure that we have quite a lot of young people in Australia, in Sydney and elsewhere, who are very capable and they're going to do a good job. So I am prepared to help wherever I can from the knowledge that I have gained from the years that have gone by. Therefore I earned and deserve to have some rest.

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